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A Sense of Place

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Panel: A sense of place III. The author discussed the importance of setting in their work. This can address topics of regional fiction as well as the challenges/rewards of reaching audiences unfamiliar with a particular location.

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A Sense of Place

By Yui Tanizaki (Japan)

When I was in high school, I didn't have friends—well, I had some, but not a lot. From the school to my home, a river ran parallel with the road, with a path on the river bank. It took hours to walk back home from the school. We normally would commute by bicycle or bus, but sometimes I preferred to walk. In spring, the cherry blossoms were in full bloom. In autumn, the cosmos flowered all along the riverside. This landscape is my strongest memory from that time in my life.

When I entered university, I moved to Kyoto where I've been living for more than ten years. In this city, there also is a river. It runs through the city center. And I also love walking along the river, thinking about myself, my problems—though this time, sometimes with a friend.

Probably because this is how I spent my adolescence, when I try to write fiction a river always appears,, whether the story is set in a city or a village, written in realistic or fantastic style, in the center of the landscape. It is only recently that I have been able to write fiction set in a land without any river. But still, I prefer to write stories with rivers.

Hence I have come to think that a landscape is, for me, a mind-scape. When I start writing, there is always a clear landscape. I sometimes feel that the landscape itself is alive. Even characters and stories are inspired by landscapes.

Where I was born and grew up is provincial city called Fukui, surrounded by rice fields. People there speak in a strong dialect. There, time felt different to me from time in big cities like Kyoto. From this feeling, my first fiction was created. I had encountered Gabriel Garcia Marques' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and decided I could write fiction, too. I got the feeling that I could give voices to the characters who live in my mind-scapes. This first story was about a village—an imaginary village—where people counted their ages in a very peculiar way, and which was also a matrilineal society. I think I mixed images of ancient Japan and the southern part of China, Yun-nan, with recollected images from my childhood.

My most recent novella is also set on Fukui, in a seaside area of this prefecture. A

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historical, scenic place, with temples, and the pure water of the Sea of Japan, and rivers. As I've been attracted to this area for long time I decided to write about it. While I was preparing to write, a big earthquake occurred in Japan—March 11th of 2011. After that, Fukui became better known for having a number of nuclear power plants. These plants supply electricity to those who live in big cities outside the district. As you know, to activate a nuclear plant, you need a lot of water to cool down the facility. Most power plants in Japan are located in beautiful seaside towns, like Fukushima used to be.

I'm not going too far into politics. Nor do I think my works are more political as compared to others'. When I wrote this novella, I only mentioned one word about this plant. But still I believe its appearance in the landscape gave the story a bit of a sad tone with its implication of the possibility of pollution.

A place has its own history, its own time. People who live there are living their own lives, suffering from their own problems, enjoying their own pleasures. However, the landscape encompasses them all. All of their sadness and happiness. All emotions are soaked into the land, or carried away by the rivers. It is somewhat like forgiveness.

Here in Iowa, I found another river running next to our hotel. I love people I've met here. I am always surrounded with friends. Yet, sometimes, I imagine the town, the IMU, and Hubbard Park without any people.

A nightscape with trees rimmed by light, the river reflecting only the shadows of buildings and woods, like in a picture by Rene Magritte. Empty corridors, empty rooms. Houses lit with orange bulbs, but still empty. It is not a very cheerful image, but somehow soothes me. In this imaginary place, only the land is alive. Only the place knows everything that happened here. Like how only our memories will live in our minds after we leave Iowa.